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USSR-Mongolia-China: Implications of Tsedenbal's Fall

Summary

This memorandum speculates on the reasons for the sudden ouster of Mongolian strongman Tsedenbal from his party and governmental posts in August and offers some preliminary views on the implications of the move for Sino-Soviet relations as well as Mongolian politics. Supported by the Soviets and devoted to their interests, Tsedenbal had ruled the People's Republic of Mongolia (MPR) with an iron grip after purging the leadership of nationalistic—and reportedly pro-Chinese—elements during the early 1960s. Tsedenbal's colleagues in the Mongolian leadership may have taken the initiative to remove him, but the final decision had to be vetted in Moscow.

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The early emphasis of Tsedenbal's successors has been on the need for more vigorous efforts to promote economic growth and on continuity in basic policy directions. Mongolia will continue to follow Moscow's foreign policy lead and, as a result, the atmosphere of Ulaanbaatar's relations with China probably will improve. The Soviets, who will be monitoring Mongolian developments closely in the coming months, have already invited new general secretary Batmonh to Moscow for his first official visit.

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Tsedenbal's Removal

Official accounts have given poor health as the reason for Yumjaagiyn Tsedenbal's removal, but the circumstances suggest that the move was politically-inspired. He was last seen on 26 July, when he left Ulaanbaatar for his annual summer vacation in the USSR, and evidently did not attend the "extraordinary plenum" of the Party Central Committee on 23 August, which relieved him from his duties as party general secretary and Politburo member. A special meeting of the national legislature later that day released him from his responsibilities as the nation's chief of state and chairman of its defense council. []

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Illness may in fact have been the precipitating factor behind the 67-year-old leader's removal. []

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[] health problems alone, in our view, would not have necessitated the decision to strip him of all his offices. He could have been allowed to retain his seat on the Politburo and his governmental posts (which are still vacant), if only his physical condition had been at issue. []

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Mongolia's isolation and the limited Western presence there make it difficult to interpret Mongolian politics, but Tsedenbal's removal may have been prompted by mounting domestic opposition to his rule. A new purge he launched in late 1981 had increased party infighting, and the Soviets reportedly complained earlier this year about what they regarded as needless squabbles and the waste of scarce administrative talent. The public announcement in February that former Politburo member Jalan-aajav had just been expelled from the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) for his "vile intrigues against party unity" was only the latest indication of serious turmoil within the leadership. The charges against Jalan-aajav, who had been one of the country's top five leaders before he was ousted from his party posts in July 1983, included allegations that he had collaborated years ago with the "anti-party group" that had been purged in 1964 for challenging Tsedenbal's pro-Soviet course. []

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Even if internal political frictions were probably the most important factor in Tsedenbal's removal, other issues could have contributed:

- The poor performance of the Mongolian economy, despite continued infusions of Soviet investment.
- Tsedenbal's slavishly pro-Soviet policies and the antics of his Russian-born wife, which had reportedly prompted grumbling in the governing elite about the Russification of the country.
- Tsedenbal's stridently anti-Chinese line, evidenced by his public airing of old scores that he wanted to settle with Beijing, even after Moscow's own rhetoric softened beginning in 1982. []

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The New Regime's First Step

The August plenum chose Premier Jambyn Batmonh as the MPRP's new general secretary and named Party Secretary Tserendashiyn Namsray to fill the seat that Tsedenbal had held on the ruling Politburo. Batmonh--who reportedly is a Tsedenbal protege--appears to be something of a technocrat, with a broad background in economic management. Namsray was added to the MPRP Secretariat only last December, after having headed the party bureaucracy's General Department since 1970, and is a remarkably young leader (45 years old) by current Mongolian as well as Soviet standards. []

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Batmonh made an obligatory bow to policy continuity in his acceptance speech, but his emphasis on the economy suggests that he will give a higher priority to attacks on mismanagement, waste and other obstacles to economic growth. His mid-October inspection tour of fuel and energy complexes, cattle farms, and other such facilities reinforces this impression. []

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Batmonh's initial remarks on foreign policy have predictably professed fealty to the USSR and its allies. But unlike Tsedenbal, he has so far refrained from provoking Beijing unnecessarily while focusing most of his criticism on the United States. In his acceptance speech, Batmonh alluded to Beijing only in complaining about the role "hegemonism" was playing in current international tensions. The Soviets may want to use Mongolia to signal Moscow's interest in improved relations with China. []

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Subsequent commentaries in the Mongolian media on relations with China have reiterated both Ulaanbaatar's desire for improved ties and its rejection of the notion that the question of a Soviet troop withdrawal from Mongolia is a fit subject for bilateral Sino-Soviet discussions. Meanwhile, the Mongolians continue to expell Chinese citizens from the MPR, but at a slower pace than during 1983, and in a manner suggesting that China and Mongolia have reached some understanding on the handling of the emigres. []

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The same message of continuity was conveyed by a Mongolian Foreign Ministry official during an unusual meeting with a visiting US diplomat on 28 September. Zhalbugiyn Choinkhor, a member of the ministry's Planning Department, confirmed that the MPR will continue under Batmonh to regard close cooperation with the USSR as the "guarantee of Mongolia's independence, sovereignty and social progress." His questions about US policy on relations with Mongolia, as well as Mongolian efforts to make the visit of the US diplomat a success, suggest that Moscow may allow Ulaanbataar to explore diplomatic contacts with the United States. There is no indication as yet, however, that Moscow--which apparently was responsible for aborting similar talks between Mongolia and the United States during the 1960s, and again during the 1970s--has dropped its reluctance to see a US presence in Ulaanbaatar. []

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Outlook and Indicators

Judging from Batmonh's background and initial public remarks, the economy will occupy the regime's immediate attention. Economic changes could play well in Moscow, which has been keeping the Mongolian economy afloat. The Soviets particularly would welcome signs of progress in stock-breeding (the nation's herd is smaller now than it was 40 years ago), in making more efficient use of Mongolia's fuel and power supplies, and in developing the extractive industries that serve the needs of the USSR's economy. []

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Batmonh could attempt some tactical adjustments to alleviate complaints about the compulsory requirement for Russian language study at the expense of Mongolian and the orientation of the Mongolian economy toward the USSR. But Moscow clearly will not allow any shift away from the Soviet camp. []

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The succession, for example, is unlikely to have any impact on the Soviet military presence in the MPR, even if Sino-Mongolian relations continue to improve. The Soviets regard the presence of their troops as essential to keep Mongolia firmly tied to the Soviet camp, not just to deter China. But Moscow probably will encourage Batmonh to continue expanding economic and cultural exchanges with China, in step with Sino-Soviet developments. []

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The Soviets could eventually conclude that the appearance of a Mongolia-US dialogue would work to their advantage. They do not seem eager to see a US presence in Mongolia for the present, judging from the continuing refusal of Soviet foreign ministry officials to discuss Mongolia with US diplomats. []

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There are two opportunities scheduled for calibrating the nature of the Soviet tether on the new regime:

- Batmonh is scheduled to arrive in Moscow at the end of this month for his first get-together with the Soviet leadership since assuming his current responsibilities as the top man in Ulaanbaatar. Official accounts of the meetings should provide a forum for Batmonh to set the new regime's line on international issues.
- The annual year-end sessions of the MPRP Central Committee and the national legislature should provide some clues to the scope of his immediate authority. If he is to be more than a caretaker leader, he will probably give up the premiership in order to assume the presidency.

In any event, Moscow will be monitoring developments in Ulaanbaatar even more closely than usual in the coming months, and any significant adjustments in policy will require the Kremlin's blessing. []

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